
Pat's POV: October 2009

The Enemy of Innovation and Creativity

Maybe it was just the kind of kid I was, but I'm guessing that most children are constantly reminded by adults to be more efficient. Maybe not exactly in those words. More likely it comes in the form of phrases like "don't be late", "use your time wisely", "don't waste money" or even "turn off the lights when you leave a room".

And while it's difficult to argue with a parent's or teacher's or coach's motivation for instilling these principles in the youngsters they're responsible for, there comes a time in life—especially in certain situations—when those very traits become problematic. One of those situations is the call to innovation or creativity.

I've become convinced that the only way to be really creative and innovative in life is to be joyfully inefficient. Again, maybe it's just my personality, but I'm guessing it applies to most of us whose jobs or lives involve dreaming up or improving on new ideas. And this makes sense. Asking someone to be both creative and efficient reminds me of that quote from Einstein: "You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war." The two activities are fundamentally opposed to one another.

Efficiency requires that we subdue our passion and allow it to be constrained by principles of logic and convention. Innovation and creativity require us to toss aside logic and convention, even without the near-term promise of a payoff. Embracing both at the same time seems to me to be a recipe for stress, dissonance and mediocrity, and yet, that is exactly what so many organizations—or better yet—leaders, do.

They exhort their employees to utilize their resources wisely and to avoid waste and redundancy, which makes perfect sense. They also exhort them to be ever-vigilant about finding new and better products or processes, which also makes sense. And yet, combining these two perfectly sensible exhortations makes no sense at all, and only encourages rational, responsible people to find a middle ground, something that is decidedly neither efficient nor innovative.

So what are leaders, who want both, to do? First, choose their poison; decide which of these two characteristics are truly more important and live with the consequences. And when you simply have to have both, create skunkworks efforts which allow a small group of people to be joyfully inefficient. No guilt. No confusion. No hesitation. And keep them largely separate from their efficient peers, at least until they've developed their ideas and are ready to share them.

But whatever you do, don't chide creative, innovative people for their inefficiency. And try to avoid throwing faint praise and backhanded compliments at them (e.g. "I guess you creative types just aren't capable of hitting a deadline or staying on budget"). Few people have the self-esteem and courage to continue being inefficient when others are calling them out as being flaky, irresponsible and unreasonable. If we're serious about innovation, we have to celebrate—yes, celebrate—the inefficiency of the people who we rely on for new ideas, even if it means they are late for meetings, they waste a little time or money and they leave the lights on when they go home.

Yours,

Pat Lencioni

TTG News

Read Pat's new ***BusinessWeek*** article "The No-Cost Way to Motivate". [Read More »](#)

Engage your employees—bring Miserable Job training to your organization. [Learn more »](#)

Assess your organization—take our complimentary Organizational Health Survey. [Learn more »](#)

Thanks for reading Pat's POV.

If you'd like to send this newsletter to a friend, [please click here](#).

Copyright © 2009 The Table Group Inc.